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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: HITMAN'S CONFESSION SHAKES KOSOVO POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT

REF: PRISTINA 518

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED Q PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Kosovo's political establishment has been shaken following allegations that Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) officials were involved in assassination plots during an effort to consolidate power from 1999 to 2003. A Democratic League of Dardania (LDD) member of parliament, Gani Geci, first introduced the assassination charges on the floor of the Kosovo Assembly on November 26, claiming that he had a videotaped confession to the killings from a former operative of the Kosovo Information Service (SHIK), the PDK's now disbanded intelligence wing. The former operative, according to Geci, had evidence of SHIK involvement in assassinations that targeted Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) officials. (Note: Geci was once a member of the LDK and was wounded in an assassination attempt in 2001. Two others were killed in the same attack. End Note) On November 29, Geci released the video confession to the media and identified the purported SHIK operative as Nazim Bllaca.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY (cont.): Later that day, Bllaca held a press conference in front of the Assembly in which he confessed to one murder; said that he was involved in 16 additional cases of murder, beatings, and torture; and charged that prominent PDK officials ordered his criminal acts. Television outlets have aired Bllaca's video in its entirety, and the local media are fixating on the story to the near exclusion of any other current event. On November 30, EULEX arrested Bllaca, but not before it came under criticism from the government and diplomatic circles, including European Quint ambassadors, for responding too slowly. Bllaca is currently under house arrest. The veracity of Bllaca's claims is not clear, but his assertions have reopened old wounds, and the incident is perceived as more than just a crime story. It is a political sensation that has rocked a PM already recovering from an ill-fated ploy to kick the LDK out of government (reftel). EULEX's handling of the case is also being closely followed as a test of its commitment to go after "big fish." END SUMMARY

GECI GRABS THE HEADLINES

¶3. (SBU) On November 26, Gani Geci, a deputy from the opposition Democratic League of Dardania (LD), interrupted an Assembly debate on the European Commission's report on Kosovo to announce that he had evidence that senior government and parliamentary officials were involved in the attempted and successful assassinations of Kosovo Assembly deputies. He waved a DVD in the air and asked Speaker Jakup Krasniqi to play the disk for the Assembly. Geci is a former member of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), and he was making a reference to assassination attempts from 2000-2001 against LDK MPs that included himself, Adem Salihaj, and Agim Veliu. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), including Jakup Krasniqi and caucus leader Rame Buja, argued against airing the DVD in the Assembly. LDK caucus leader Lutfi Haziri attempted, but failed, to win support for forming an ad hoc committee to review the evidence. Geci's initial claim sparked media speculation, but he offered no details to substantiate his allegations.

A HIT MAN CONFESSES TO THE PRESS

¶4. (SBU) On November 29, Gani Geci and Adem Salihaj, who, like Geci, is a current member of LD who had previously represented LDK in the Assembly, held a press conference in the Kosovo Assembly building where they distributed to the media copies of the DVD that Geci had previously proffered to the Assembly. The DVD contained the confession to murder and other crimes of an individual named Nazim Bllaca, who claims that he was once a member of the PDK's shadowy intelligence and clandestine operations group, the Kosovo Information Service (SHIK), which disbanded in 2008, the day before Kosovo's constitution came into force. Geci and Salihaj invited journalists to meet Bllaca in front of the Kosovo Assembly.

¶5. (SBU) During his meeting with the media, Bllaca said that he worked for SHIK from 1999 to 2003 and participated in approximately

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17 crimes -- including assassinations, assassination attempts, beatings, threats, and blackmail -- at SHIK's direction. He told the media that he worked for PDK presidency member Azem Syla and took his direct orders, including the names of people targeted for assassination, from Syla's son-in-law, Shpresim Uka. Bllaca explained that he thought he had been acting on behalf of Kosovo and targeting traitors and those who had collaborated with Serbian authorities, but he said that he later came to believe that factions within SHIK were pursuing other agendas.

A MORE DETAILED VIDEO CONFESSION

¶6. (SBU) Bllaca offers greater detail in his DVD confession, which many media outlets broadcast in its entirety. In addition to Syla, he implicates other senior PDK officials, notably: Xhavit Haliti (MP and Assembly Presidency member), Fatmir Limaj (Minister of Transportation), and Fatmir Xhelili (Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs). During the video confession, Bllaca says that he worked in the execution pillar of the SHIK, which assassinated "collaborators," LDK officials, and ICTY witnesses. According to Bllaca, SHIK's actions against LDK intensified when former president Ibrahim Rugova returned, and SHIK felt it needed to take action against "LDK heads" in order to counter his influence. Bllaca offers detailed accounts of events surrounding a number of murders and other acts of violence that he attributes primarily to Azem Syla. Among his accounts of crimes and misdeeds, Bllaca also claims to have committed one murder himself.

PM, PRESIDENT CALL FOR RESPECT FOR RULE OF LAW

¶7. (SBU) According to our sources, the day after the news broke, Prime Minister Thaci met with President Sejdiu (LDK) and tried to secure (and failed to get) a joint press appearance to reassure the country that Bllaca's claims were spurious. On November 30, Thaci convoked the Quint Ambassadors and noted that the primacy of the rule of law was key in this instance and that he supported a full investigation of the Bllaca allegations devoid of politics. After a special session of the Kosovo Security Council which Thaci called to

address the situation, he issued similar statement to the media. President Sejdiu, who met with the Charge to discuss the incident November 30, also issued a statement to the press, calling for respect for the judicial process, as well as for calm among Kosovo's citizens. Sejdiu's private message echoed Thaci's: respect for the rule of law is paramount, and the Blaca case should be turned over to law enforcement and judicial institutions for proper, non-political investigation.

A DEFINING MOMENT FOR EULEX

¶18. (SBU) On November 30, the day after Blaca's video aired, Thaci leaned on EULEX Deputy Head of Mission Roy Reeve to take immediate action and arrest Blaca (EULEX Head Yves de Kermabon was out of the country). He also complained to the Quint that EULEX had prevented Kosovo authorities from arresting Blaca while not moving quickly enough itself to deal with the matter. EULEX did take Blaca into custody on November 30, but EULEX had originally planned to arrest Blaca much later in the week. Government, public, and diplomatic pressure prompted it to act sooner. At a December 1 Quint meeting, European ambassadors (except the French), criticized EULEX's handling of the Blaca case and characterized it as a test of EULEX's credibility. The Italian, German and British heads of mission all said it was key for EULEX to be seen as "on the ball" in this critical case. Quint ambassadors called for EULEX to move beyond its mantra of technical monitoring, mentoring, and advising to a position of "political responsibility" and sensitivity to local political developments.

COMMENT

¶19. (SBU) Nazim Blaca's sensationalist confession has captured Kosovo's full attention. On the day when Kosovo offered its defense of the legality of its declaration of independence before the

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International Court of Justice, Kosovo's front pages focused only on allegations of political assassinations. We do not know where the truth lies in Nazim Blaca's yarn, but its immediate impact is powerful and negative for a weakened Prime Minister and his PDK party, which is still reeling from an ill-advised attempt to dump LDK from the coalition. It confirms a common perception among Kosovo citizens that PDK is ruthless and prepared to employ violence to achieve its goals, and it does nothing to help PDK as it moves to mayoral runoff elections on December 13. That said, the crisis could yet prove to be an opportunity for EULEX and for Kosovo. If EULEX investigates Blaca's allegations against top PDK officials thoroughly, and powerful men are called to account for their actions, this incident could help Kosovo to deal with the legacy of political violence from the immediate post-conflict period as well as persuade citizens that the "the rule of law" is more than just a slogan. For now, a EULEX judge on December 1 ordered Blaca held for 30 days house arrest pending further investigation.

MURPHY